

The Thing That Stared

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Once when I went to the village from our house in the woods, I would walk along its pleasant sunny streets and people would smile and greet me cheerfully. They would ask me to their homes and over the teapot I would tell them of my adventures in South American jungles, where I was an explorer. They are simple people, but kindly, and I enjoyed talking to them.

My little wife never came with me. I explained to them, so that they would know she wasn't being impolite, but preferred to stay in our house in the woods. They would laugh and agree that women are peculiar.

That was at first. After a while they began to turn away when I approached, and I could imagine them in their houses, talking about me when I passed. This makes me unhappy and morbid. It has a strange effect on me.

Now when I go to the village it is dark and there are no lights. I thought that if they saw me in the dark they would pity me and ask me in to tell them about my travels, but they do not.

Why should they shut themselves in their dark houses when I come? If anyone is on the street, he runs off when

I appear, as if I were a ghost or demon. But I am not. I am just a lonely man.

My little wife doesn't speak to me. She just looks at me coldly with her staring eyes. Only this journal is my friend. To it I can tell my sorrows and my fears, and it understands.

I am becoming furious with those stupid people. Tonight I am going to the village again, and if no one speaks to me this time I don't know what I'll do.

I have not written in my journal for several weeks. It is not because I am no longer lonely, but because I have found a new excitement. It used to be enough to sit and mock my wife because she did not speak to me. But no longer.

Now I play a little game. I go to the village at night determined that someone shall speak to me. If anyone did, instead of running to his house and bolting the door, I should win, and at the same time have someone to talk to, for I like telling about my adventures.

But if the person I meet is not talkative and prefers athletics, then I must chase him and kill him.

I have played the game several times and each time I had to chase and kill someone. I do it with my hands about his throat. It gives me a strange exhilaration.

Sometimes I pretend that they have wronged me, and that I am taking revenge. Sometimes I pretend that I am again in the jungle and that these are wild beasts surrounding me, who must be killed lest they kill me.

But back here with my sympathetic journal no pretense is necessary. I kill because it gives me pleasure, because I like to—and because I am hungry.

I feel very strong at these moments of excitement, and their futile struggles as I choke the breath from their bodies amuses me. Then I sling the body over my shoulder and bring it home.

There is a great pot in my fireplace where I cook the meal. Each time I offer some of the repast to my little

wife, but she only looks at me with her cold eyes and says nothing, so that I have to glance away.

Sometimes I feel like killing her, but I know that I cannot.

Last night I forgot the rules of my game. I was walking down the street with the full moon staring at me, when a little fat man came out of a house, carrying a bag. I recognized him as the doctor. I greeted him and he answered me. He spoke kindly but said I must excuse him because he had a case and was in a hurry. I explained that it was more necessary that I speak to him, but he pushed me away, saying later, later.

This angered me, and I killed him. Now I am a little sorry, because he might have spoken to me later, as he promised, and I should have liked that.

All the same, I am a little glad because he is not so lean and tough as the others were.

My wife still stares at me, as the moon was doing to-night. It makes me uneasy.

Although I am in agony, I must write.

Last night I went again to the village. This time I met a woman, which I had never done before at night. It was too dark for me to see her face.

I began to play my game with her and she answered me, laughing. But her laughter taunted me and again I forgot the rules. My hands crept around her throat.

Then the moon came from behind a cloud. I recognized her. She was—my wife!

This was impossible, and it frightened me. I let her go, which probably was a mistake. If I had killed her, again, I think it would have made everything all right, and they would not have shot at me. But I let her go, and men came running down the street with guns.

A bullet caught me in the stomach and I have stumbled back here. They have not come yet, because they are frightened of me, but . . .

What have I been writing?

As I sat here bleeding to death, the red mists cleared away from my brain. In an agony of mind that outweighs the pain of the bullet I have read what was written in this journal. Have I been mad?

I look up from the page and see, hanging on the wall, the shrunken head of a woman, her long golden hair surrounding that gruesome yet once beautiful face.

My wife!

I remember now. The long trek with her through the jungles of Ecuador, lost. Being found by a savage tribe and taken in.

The throbbing drums, the weird chants, the rites and ceremonies that must have turned my mind. My acceptance of their ways . . . turning cannibal.

Then the sacrifice they demanded of me to become a member of their unholy cult. Killing my wife and shrinking her head to join the scores of others hanging from poles in front of the witch-doctor's hut!

It must have been a slight lessening of the madness that made me steal her head one night and escape.

There are no words to describe this awakening from madness, the horror and disbelief and disgust with oneself.

I am glad I am dying. Life now, with these memories, would be unbearable.

They are coming now, the men with the guns. I can see them through the window. They will find a corpse and his diary.

I don't care what they do with me, but I hope they will give a decent burial to—her.